DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 254 TM 025 207

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TITLE Testing Vocabulary.
PUB DATE [96]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Knowledge Level; Language Proficiency; Language Tests; Multiple Choice Tests; *Second Language Learning; Student Evaluation; *Test Construction; Test Content; Test Items; Test Use; *Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

A good knowledge of English vocabulary is important for anyone who wants to use the language, so knowledge of vocabulary is often tested. A test may test one or all of the types of vocabulary (active spoken, active written, passive listening, and passive reading), but the test maker should be aware of the differences among the types and which is being tested. Vocabulary content to be tested should be derived from appropriate materials, suitable for the needs of the students being assessed. Appropriate test content items can be placed into various types of multiple-choice formats or can be used in set items in which the examinee selects the word that fits or doesn't fit. Matching items, completion items, and word formation items are other ways to test student vocabulary. Another vocabulary-related skill to test is the ability to guess the meaning of an item from context. These items are particularly difficult to evalua`e, but test a skill students need to develop. In evaluating vocabulary, it is useful to be able to test from various points of view: (1) knowledge of word meanings; (2) knowledge of word forms; and (3) knowledge of how to surmise meanings of unknown words from the context. (SLD)

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Testing Vocabulary

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A good knowledge of English vocabulary is important for anyone who wants to use the language, so knowledge of vocabulary is often tested. It is important that the test maker be aware of what he/she is doing when testing vocabulary.

Types of Vocabulary Knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge can be divided into four types. The first is active speaking vocabulary, that is, words that the speaker is able to use in speaking. The second is passive listening vocabulary, which is words that the listener recognizes but cannot necessarily produce when speaking. The third type is passive reading vocabulary, which refers to words that a reader recognizes but would not necessarily be able to produce. Finally, there is active writing vocabulary, which is words that a writer is able to use in writing. This typology can be expressed in the following chart:

	Oral	Graphic
Active	active spoken	active written
Passive	passive listening	passive reading

A test may test one or all of these types of vocabulary, but the test maker should be aware of the differences among these types and which is being tested. Most traditional vocabulary tests test only passive reading vocabulary, since they are paper and pencil tests and rely on reading. If all the test maker intends to test is passive reading vocabulary, that is fine, but there should be an awareness that that is what is being tested. If test specifications indicate that other types of vocabulary should be tested, then other methods need to be developed to test other types of vocabulary knowledge. Once the decision has been made to test other types of vocabulary knowledge, there must also be a decision about how to weight

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the four types of items. If the type of English education students have been exposed to emphasized reading, then it is appropriate to give passive reading vocabulary the greatest weight.

Sources of Words to Test

The test maker's job is easiest if all of the students have been using the same syllabus or course of study. In that case, sources as the syllabus, the textbook (with emphasis on words that occur in natural speech or writing), students' reading materials, and lexical errors form students' written work or incorrect answers on a cloze test.

If the testees have not been using the same syllabus, for example, in the case of a proficiency test used to judge testees' suitability for a certain task, the problem of choosing vocabulary becomes more complicated. In this case, the students do not have a common syllabus to draw on. In that case, it is probably most appropriate to draw on the vocabulary of the task for which the testees are being tested. For example, if the test is being used to choose students to go to an English-medium university, then the items for the test can be chosen from academic vocabulary.

In any case, when testing vocabulary, the grammatical structures used should be easy to understand. If the grammatical structures are difficult to understand, the test is testing both the ability to understand the grammatical structure and knowledge of vocabulary. Therefore, a testee might miss an item due to a lack of understanding of the grammatical structure, not due to lack of vocabulary knowledge. (Conversely, when testing grammatical knowledge, difficult vocabulary should be avoided to avoid testing vocabulary rather than grammatical knowledge.)

Multiple Choice Tasks

Research indicates that the best distracters for vocabulary items are either 1) words that have a similar meaning to the correct word but which are inappropriate in context, or 2) words that are contextually related but which do not fit in the context.

When choosing the four or five alternatives, care should be taken to choose words that are of a similar level of difficulty. If the correct alternative is much more difficult than any of the other alternatives, the testee might choose it not because he/she knows that it is correct but because all of the others can be eliminated.

Alternatives should be the same part of speech as the word in the stem. If one is a different part of speech, that can easily be eliminated as a possible answer.

Synonym/Definition Items

The simplest multiple choice item has a single word in the stem, with four or five alternatives. Testees choose from among the alternatives the word or the definition that is the closest in meaning to the word in the stem. Alternatively, the definition might be the stem, and the testees choose from four or five words that one that fits the definition. Obviously the definition needs to be simply and clearly written.

Picture Items

The stem in the previous type of item can be replaced with a picture. The testees choose which of the four or five alternatives matches the picture. Obviously it should be clear what is being depicted in the picture, so that the test is of the meaning of the word, not the testee's ability to interpret the picture. This type of test is appropriate for elementary students.

Sentence Items

Another option is to test the vocabulary item by putting it in a sentence and having the testees choose the alternative that has the same meaning as a word in the sentence that is underlined, in italics, in bold type, etc. This is a preferred type of multiple choice vocabulary item, since the problem item appears in context and the context helps give the vocabulary word a specific meaning. However, in this case, the testee should not be able to surmise the meaning of the word from the context, unless the intention of the item is to test that skill.

Context Items

Another type of multiple choice item is one that has a sentence with a blank in it, and the testees choose which of the alternatives fit in the sentence. These items are difficult to write, because it is difficult to provide the right amount of context. If not enough context is provided, the question becomes difficult to answer; if too much context is provided, too much information, grammatical and semantic, is provided.

Sometimes such questions involve a grammatical component. For example,

Would you please _____ the proposal.
a. consider b. think c. make d. give

In this case, "think" (about) is similar to the correct answer, but it does not fit grammatically. While a few of these types of items might be acceptable, too many of them will put too much emphasis on grammar rather than vocabulary.

Sometimes vocabulary items test collocations. For example,

I _____ my watch to see what time it was.
a. looked at b. saw c. watched d. gazed at

In this case, what is being tested is the knowledge of the collocation "look at my watch." Again, knowing collocations is part of knowing vocabulary, but the test should not be dominated by such items.

Set Items

Another type of item is one where testees are presented with a set of words. In the case of a recognition type of item, the testees decide which word in the set does not fit with the others; in the case of production type items, the testee indicates what topic ties all of the words together.

For example,

Circle the word that does not fit.
dollar
yen
pound
money

(answer = money)

Write down the subject that each group of words is related to.

bedroom
living room
kitchen
dining room

(subject = house)

The difficulty of these items is that they may be interpreted in different ways. In some cases, arguments could be made for excluding different words, depending on the way that the student thinks about them. Also, a student may understand all of the words but not be able to understand what the test maker is trying to get at.

Matching Items

Another type of item is one in which the testee is presented with a short passage or several unconnected sentences with blanks. The testee chooses from among a list of words that are given (usually more words than blanks) the word which fits in each blank. In these items, it is preferable to have all the words in a set the same part of speech, the same tense in the case of verbs, etc., so that students need to choose what fits in the blank based on meaning, not grammar. The purpose of having extra words is so that the testees cannot answer the last item by having eliminated all other possibilities. On the other hand, the more items there are, the more likelihood that two items could conceivably fit in the same blank.

A variation of this type of items is one in which the testee is given a reading passage and a list of words and is instructed to find synonyms in the passage for each word in the list.

Completion Items

Completion items are similar to those described above, except that testees are not given words from which to choose. They must supply the words for the blanks. The problem with this type of item is that it is very difficult to write items for which there is one and only one answer.

Word Formation Items

Another type of item tests not the testees' knowledge of the meaning of words but their knowledge of word forms. In this case, testees are given a sentence or paragraph, and they are instructed to fill in blanks with the correct forms of the words that they are given. (A variation on this is to write multiple choice items, in which the stem is a sentence with a blank, and testees choose from among four forms of the same word.)

For example,

Write the correct form of the word in capital letters in the blank.

HONEST
Darren says he didn't cheat, but I _____ don't know what to think.

Guessing Meaning from Context

Another vocabulary-related skill to test is the ability to guess the meaning of an unknown item from context. In testing this skill, students are usually presented with a word that they would be unlikely to know and are asked to figure out what it means. Among the clues from the context are:

1) a synonym in another clause, for example, "Your explanation doesn't need to be so convoluted. Such complex explanations just confuse people."
2) an antonym or contrasted word in another clause, for example, "May was indignant about the problem, and I had to calm her down."
3) a cause or effect of the word in question, for example, "Pollution from that factory is contaminating the local farmers' fields."
4) an illustration of the word in question, for example, "Jeff is so parsimoneous that he won't spend a penny is he doesn't have to."
5) the use of an object, for example, "I used a pitter to remove the seeds from the cherries."

Testing this skill can be done as a multiple choice item or by requiring the testees to supply a definition. The problem with the latter type of item is that it is very difficult to evaluate the answers, because some are likely to be almost correct but not exactly. It is necessary that the meaning of the target word be very clear from the context, and for this type of item, pretesting is particularly important for that reason.

Summary

Knowledge of vocabulary is important to language use, and it is useful to be able to test from various points of view--knowledge of word meanings, knowledge of word forms, and knowledge of how to surmise the meanings of unknown words from the context.